

## EPC Presbytery of the Pacific

### **Ruling Elder Ethics when a Governing Term has Expired Guidelines for Congregational Leaders**

*In the church we frequently talk about the relationship between elder and people as one of “family” and, especially when relationships are long, affection runs deep between a congregation and the Ruling Elder who has served faithfully. It can be difficult for both Elders and church members to understand that the relationship must change significantly when a Ruling Elder’s Governing Term has expired. While Ordination is for a lifetime, the Power of Jurisdiction (or Governance) is held only by active members of Session. The exiting Ruling Elder continues to be an effective Servant of Christ and His church in the local congregation and remains bound by his or her ordination and membership vows.*

This Presbytery recognizes that there are potentially difficult situations involving the relationship of a serving Ruling Elder to his or her Session. The Ministerial Committee provides these guidelines as a means of assisting both Ruling Elders and congregations to avoid awkward situations, maintain the church’s ethical standards, and encourage new Session dynamics that will be established.

#### **THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSITION in the LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

When meaningful governing participation in a Session ends, there is often the impulse both on the part of departing Ruling Elder and congregation, to “not let go”. While usually motivated by positive thoughts and feelings, trying to ‘hang on’ to a governance relationship that has officially ended can be very damaging to a congregation:

- First of all, the EPC Book of Government clearly differentiates between the duties a Ruling Elder should exercise when governing as a member of the Session, and when serving the church when not a member of the Session.
  - When on the Session an Elder exercises the Authority of Jurisdiction “jointly with all other active Elders (Ruling and Teaching) and always reflecting the essential unity of the Church in determining the mind of Christ”. [BoG 3-3, 9-8]
  - When not on the Session that same Elder is to continue to exercise the Responsibility of Order “as they serve, proclaim, and minister in the name of Christ as under-shepherds... especially sharing the gospel, reproving the erring, visiting the sick, and in other ways exhibiting to the world the fruit of the Spirit”. [BoG 3-2, 9-10]

So there is clearly a significant role of service to the congregation for an elder after stepping down from Session membership, but it is also significantly different from the governing role.

- The elder relationship is based on clear boundaries and mutual trust. When a Ruling Elder leaves Session, he or she no longer has access to the type of information that is in the Session’s purview. Since that elder is no longer entitled to the same level of access, he or she must both relinquish avenues of information that were formerly theirs and trust Session to make informed decisions.
- . While serving elders are greatly encouraged to serve all members of the congregation, any governing role, either in the local church or in the other “courts” of the EPC (the Presbytery or the General Assembly), should come only on the invitation or approval of Session. When questions regarding leadership or decision making arise, those should always be deferred to Session.
- The elder relationship is based upon ethical considerations. A serving elder should take great care that other members of the congregation not use that elder’s former governing position as an opportunity to triangulate against the Pastor(s), Staff and/or Session. A wise serving elder will not only listen to complaints from fellow congregants, but also encourage those congregants to speak directly with the concerned parties as prescribed in Matthew 18. A serving elder should never, whether openly or in private, disparage the decisions of Session. If an issue of disagreement occurs, that elder should ask to meet with Session.